

Field Report

Don't Stop Believing: Journeys School

Mark R. Dixon
Southern Illinois University

This report showcases an alternative school for children with emotional and behavioral disorders that is engaging in the practice of behavior analysis. The core principles of behavioral science at work include contingency management, goal setting, teaching self-control, mindfulness, and acceptance and commitment therapy. Student outcomes appear extremely promising.

In the famous song by Johnny Cash, “I’ve Been Everywhere” the Man in Black claims to have been in essentially every large and small town across America. When I listened to that song, I often enjoyed hearing all the names of towns that I too had encountered. But, sorry Johnny, you haven’t been everywhere. At least not to Delhi, IL. A town in the middle of the middle of nowhere, Delhi’s population is less than 100. Some might consider it a “suburb” on the outskirts of Jerseyville, IL with a population of 8,465. But if you have been to Jerseyville, you know Delhi really isn’t even a suburb. Regardless of how you want to frame the town of Delhi, it is small. However, as you approach the front door of the old Delhi Elementary School building, you quickly realize something big is happening in this tiny place.

As I park my car and look at the school marquee it says something far different than the empty platitudes found on similar signs across the country. “Mindful or mind-full?” A question of gigantic proportions that only a fringe niche of behavior analysts might understand. Yet inside the walls of this school, it is a slogan that everyone understands quite well.

The old Delhi Elementary is the home to a radical new alternative school for children with emotional and behavioral disorders that have become too challenging for their local school districts to educate successfully.

Journeys School is a place where such students receive an equally challenging educational experience in an environment that is therapeutically designed to promote psychological well-being in addition to academic success. Most of the students are from the neighboring Jerseyville school district, where a tremendous positive relationship has emerged between the district (who owns the old school building), and the area’s regional special education cooperative. Cindy Penrod, the Special Education Director for Region III Special Education Cooperative claims:

In order for students such as these to move forward academically, they will need to also move forward psychologically. Traditional education placements don’t

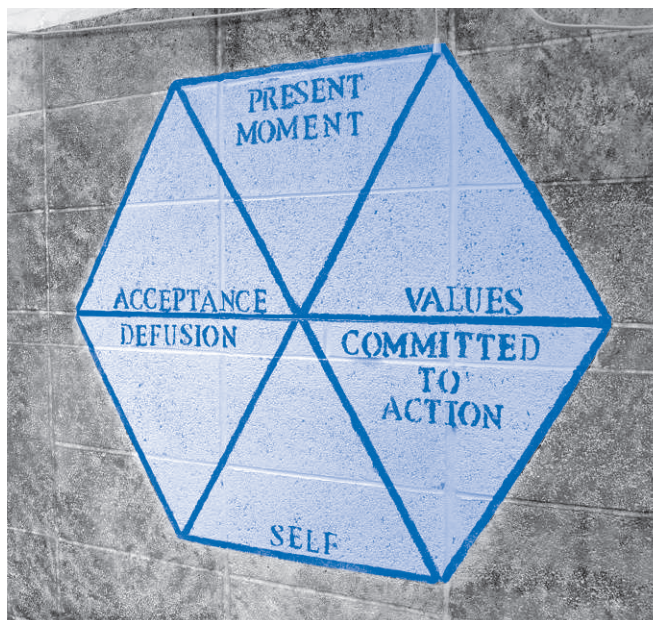


possess the latter with the degree of intensity such as that found at Journeys. We have been very fortunate to be working with districts that see our big vision, that trust us, and who celebrate our successes.

And celebrate they do. Journeys has doubled student attendance school wide compared to the same students at different placements last year. Also, the average GPA in the school is a mind-blowing 3.0. Up from 1.5 last year.

As you walk the halls of this small retrofitted elementary school, you find walls decorated with slogans that look more at home in a meditation center or yoga studio than a school for students with behavioral disorders. In fact, with a number of these 5th–12th grade students on probation for criminal activity, it seems that the touchy-feely mystical decoration of the school would fail miserably. Or at least get torn off the walls by a disgruntled student.

Journeys is not based on a silly Dr. Phil clinical approach. Instead, the school relies heavily on acceptance and commitment therapy as the underbelly of what happens in each of the three classrooms every single day. Mary Pearson, the principal of Journeys stated, “Each morning every classroom of students completes a 30 minute ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) lesson led by one of the staff. It is the best way to start the day.” I personally have seen many of these daily lessons, and how the kids respond. It is amazing. Big tough kids, talking about what makes them sad, lonely, and how they are attempting to move their lives into a direction in which they value. What is even more impressive is that all staff meet on Tuesday mornings before the kids arrive and hold a “book club” in which they discuss a variety of topics related to ACT. Once you peek inside the classrooms and see their 180-day curriculum of ACT lessons, you realize this place is something special.



There is a sort of hippy edge to the building, with tied-dyed painted ACT diagrams on the classroom walls, the plan to start a bee colony, Grateful Dead music playing on a late Friday afternoon, and staff that seem to be seriously concerned about recycling. If more places in American education worked like this, perhaps high-risk students such as these would actually have a better chance of academic success. There still is a firm rooted contingency management system embedded in the classrooms where points are earned for work completion and redeemable for functionally relevant reinforcers such as escape from work cards, access to preferred items, and social attention from staff. But points alone don't cut it.

“Level and points systems are too simplistic for the real complexities of life. We find Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to be the missing piece for a true comprehensive program,” Penrod notes.

Mary Beth Paul, one of the classroom teachers and initial founders of the program doubted the shift from traditional behavioral-disorder classrooms to something like Journeys. She said, “I didn't want to do it. I said

no, I was not going to do it.” But it was my job, and so I did. And now I see what a difference it can make.” Mary Beth has been at Journey since it began in August 2012. She also piloted the approach in another location with great success during the 2011–2012 school year. As Journeys wraps up the first year of the school impressive outcomes keep accruing. The first graduating student will complete the program with his high school diploma in May 2013. More will follow next year. There is talk about a replication site, and people from all over the state are beginning to take notice of this little town and request tours. If Johnny Cash were still alive, he would surely want to stop by and see how peoples' lives are being transformed every day using the science of behavior analysis.